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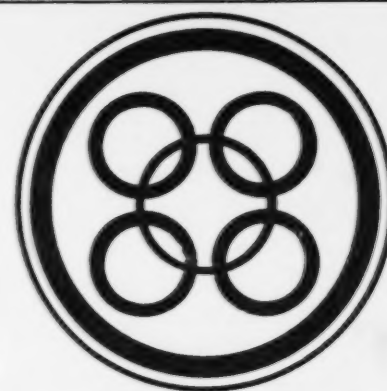
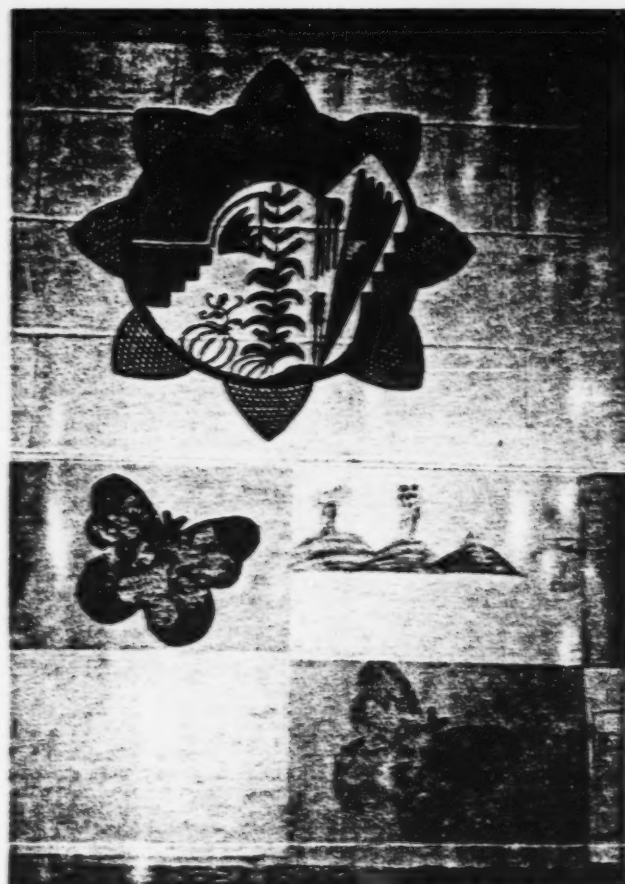
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ABSTRACT

Some of the ways young children initially approach writing, including their understanding and involvement with the writing process, is the focus of this paper. It illustrates the variety of ways children deal with the concept of spaces between words, the differences between printed and cursive writing, and the left-to-right, top-to-bottom directionality of writing. The paper concludes with the observation that understanding how young children perceive and use the conventions of writing may be the first step in determining what information they are ready to learn and may lead to more effective techniques for teaching the conventions as adults use them. (EL)

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Fat Letters and Other Observations of Young Children Learning to Write

by Susan E.M. Hall

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Fat Letters and Other Observations of Young Children Learning to Write

By Susan E.M. Hall
Laramie, WY

Can I make letters that look like the letters in books? Can I write a story that reads in a spiral? Can I write without blank space between words? Can I use pictures instead of letters to tell part of the story? Can you read what I wrote? These are only a few of the questions that must go through the mind of a young child during the beginning stages of learning to write. All of them, apparently, can be answered in the affirmative if the teacher is willing to accept experimentation as part of the process of learning to write. Risk-taking is a skill needed in many areas of academic learning, but especially in writing. Children who are allowed to take risks will produce some interesting results as they proceed along the path to conventional writing.

Adults view writing within the range of standard conventions. Writing moves from left to right. Blank spaces are left between the words. Usually a line ends with a complete word. Capital letters and punctuation help us decipher the meaning of the words. Young children who are beginning to write often overlook these conventions. In the minds of many young children, writing is simply putting letters on the paper. Standard conventions are learned

over a long period of time. Children who are allowed to experiment with the writing process and draw some conclusions on their own use a very different set of rules for written English. Perhaps, insisting on the use of convention without experimentation is inhibiting to the child's clear understanding of the writing process.

This article looks at some of the ways children initially approach writing. The children observed were all kindergarten students who had been taught the basics of invented spelling and were being encouraged to use their skills, on an individual level, to write stories and other messages. All of these children eventually learned to use a more standard set of conventions as they progressed through the experimental processes, but their initial efforts reveal some interesting ideas about writing.

One of the conventions adults use when writing comes almost unconsciously. Spaces are left between words. To leave a space between words requires the use of negative space, that is, leaving the space empty or blank. For many reasons, this is a very difficult concept to understand. Many children solve the problem of negative space by making it positive space.

When Benedict began to consider the possibility of leaving spaces between words he initially placed the emphasis on the spaces. He drew rectangles between each word and then carefully filled in each rectangle. The resulting spaces were filled in to avoid blank space but there was also a clear division between words. For weeks it took Benedict a very long time to complete a piece of writing because he spent more time drawing rectangles than writing letters.

Jason used a different technique but also carried word spaces to the extremes of positive space. He drew lines of double dashes (equal signs) between words, often as many as ten. Sometimes the words appeared centered on the page with the equal signs extending to each edge in a decorative pattern.

Shauna did much of her writing with colored pens or markers. She separated words with a perpendicular line of a different color. She even explained the dividing lines might be mistaken for number ones if they were the same color as the words.

What these children were doing was an elaborate variation of the beginning conception of word spaces and avoiding negative space used by many children. Often children placed a dot or a dash between the words. Some left space on each side of the mark but still demonstrated the need to fill the empty space.

Another approach to separating words was used by several children who were writing with colored markers. Their technique was to write each word with a different colored marker. They were able to avoid word spaces altogether and still make each word separate.

Perhaps one of the reasons children have difficulty leaving word spaces is that they do not view words in the same way adults do. Often a young child accepts a phrase or a sentence as a "word." Oral language has a longer pause at the end of a sentence or phrase than between words, and it is often this pause that young children attend to first. Young children who have heard many fairy tales and attempt to write their own, often begin the writing with "Once upon a time." Watching young children write this phrase using invented spelling and

word spaces indicates they are perceiving a single word. Initial spellings of this phrase appear as OASAPATIM or WNSBANATIM. Even as they begin to space the phrase, they tend to write it as three words rather than four creating spellings such as WSA PADA TIM or WAS APAN ATIM. Other word combinations also are perceived as a single word rather than several words. "Lazy step-sisters" becomes LAZSDSDRS and "golden harp" becomes GDINHP. Until children understand and accept the definition of a word in the same way adults accept it, it may be unfair to expect them to use word spaces as a standard convention of writing.

Adults who leave spaces between words also usually understand that it is not acceptable to divide words at the end of a line without some sort of notation, usually a hyphen. The idea that words should stay together as a single entity on a line is often lost on young beginning writers. When they reach the edge of the paper with an incomplete word they are faced with the dilemma of what to do next. Many use the approach of squeezing smaller letters into the space. Some children simply continue on the next line. Others write down the edge of the paper. Some children solve this problem by never encountering it. They write in one word columns. Each word has a line unto itself.

Another convention of English writing is that, with few exceptions, it proceeds from left to right across the page. Most adults accept this and read and write in that manner.

Ramon, like many children, began writing before he clearly understood the convention of writing from left to right. He began correctly but when he reached the right edge of the page he began to write down

that edge. Reaching the bottom of the paper he proceeded right to left across the bottom. When he had completed that line he began to write up the left side. The fourth line was then written left to right below the first line. The words continued in this spiraling pattern into the center. All the letters were formed correctly and the story was readable --if the reader understood the spiral nature of the writing.

Sometimes a mistake will create a story written in a form other than top to bottom. Briar began a story at the top left of a piece of paper but made a mistake. He colored over all the letters he'd begun with and then moved to the bottom line to write the title. The first line of the story was written left to right on the line above and the story proceeded up the page. "The End" was written on the top line just below his initial mistake.

Occasionally the way the words look on the paper affect how it is written. Sonya began a story at a time when she was using two or three letters for each word. Her first line had four words and she had spaced them wide apart. When she wrote the following lines she spaced the words the same way, four words to a line. The result looked almost as if it should be read top to bottom in four columns.

When columns are used by adults, as in newspapers and magazines, the words read left to right in each column and usually the columns follow each other in the same direction. When young children attempt to use columns in imitation of newspapers they often use them differently. Sonya turned a sheet of blank paper sideways so that it was wider than it was long. She then drew two lines on the paper, dividing it into three sections.

She began her writing in the right hand space. Writing left to right she filled this space. She then proceeded to the space to the far left and filled it. The story finished in the center section. If the reader knew how the story was written it was quite clear. However, if the reader tried to read the columns left to right the story was lost.

Even children who generally write left to right and top to bottom apparently do not always perceive the sequential nature of writing. Pedro wrote BARS TAR R 2 for the sentence "There are two bears." He explained that BARS should be written first because that was who he was writing about. Another common misconception is that words left out can be added anywhere. Often young children who read their stories and discover a word is missing will write it at the bottom of the paper. The necessary words are all present--just not in the order most adult readers would expect to find them.

Young children trying to confine their writing to one page will often develop a system for making everything fit. The most common approach is to return to the top of the paper and fill any unused space with the end of the story. Jessica had a wonderful technique that solved the problem of running out of paper but often left the reader looking for another page. She simply stopped when she reached the end of the paper and wrote "The End." Children will use these techniques even when they know paper is in plentiful supply.

When reading, many children come to a fairly obvious conclusion many adults don't give much thought to. The letters printed in books are not drawn with a single line produced by a pencil. Some children

who have mastered conventional manuscript letters attempt to imitate the typing which appears in books. Jose accomplished this by literally drawing each letter in outline form and then filling in the space. Sean accomplished it by first printing the letter, then drawing around it. Yvette simply drew the outline of the letters and left the space between empty. Words written with what Jose called "fat letters" acquire a picture quality that makes writing an entirely different task than printing words.

Young children may make other observations about letters and writing which affect the way they make letters. Jessica observed people writing in cursive and decided she could do the same. What was obvious to her was that the letters were connected in a single line. That cursive letters took a different form than manuscript letters was not so obvious to her. She created her own form of cursive writing by printing letters, then connecting them with additional lines. She became so good at this technique that she could write her name in a single line that could be mistaken for a squiggle unless the reader was aware of what she was doing.

Another concept of how to write more creatively was also the result of observation. Eric had such difficulty with fine motor skills that he had been provided with an engineering lettering guide to assist him when writing. When he traced letters through the holes in the plastic frame he produced letters which were disjointed; B appeared similar to a closely spaced l3. Bryan observed the results of this lettering and apparently liked what he saw. He drew letters with a small space between each line so his letters, too, appeared to have been made with a lettering guide.

The writing process can also be altered by what young children have experienced previously. In one kindergarten room, children had been taught the correct form of individual letters in part through tracing letters the teacher had drawn. Several children who had derived great pleasure from tracing continued the technique after they had begun to write with invented spelling. They first wrote their message with a pencil, then carefully traced each letter with a colored marker.

Sometimes children will supplement the letters with small pictures to help convey the message. Valerie inserted hearts among her letters in a story about a birthday party. When questioned, she explained the hearts were there "because people love you on your birthday." Yvette drew a small eye with tears following the letters CR to represent "cried" in a story about a sad animal.

Children who have had experience with writing where they used titles will quickly learn to denote a title in some manner. Some children will underline the title in a fairly conventional, but often very elaborate, way. Some children will draw a box around the title. Some children will use a different style of lettering for the title. Valerie indicated titles by preceding them with a "squiggle" or spiral.

Children who are allowed to experiment with writing as a whole process as well as with invented spelling will produce some very interesting manuscripts. Often their technique and form are as exciting as the actual content of their story. Sometimes children appear to experiment for the sake of experimentation, but they may really be demonstrating their understanding and involvement with the writing process. Teachers of young children need to be aware

of what children are doing when they write. An awareness of how young children perceive and use the conventions of writing may well lead to more effective techniques for

teaching the conventions as adults use them. Observation could well be the first step in determining what information young children are ready to learn.

Introducing the Author

Susan Hall began her teaching career with the Head Start Program in Wheatland, Wyoming. Since that time, she has taught in full day kindergarten programs in Laramie, Wyoming and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The last three years she has been developing a writing program for five and six year olds as a prereading activity. Her results have been encouraging. While Ms. Hall has come to believe that it is unrealistic to assume that all children in a kindergarten program will learn to write in a manner that is readable to adults, she does not believe it is unrealistic to view writing as an important part of the kindergarten curriculum. Children in these classes who learn to write using invented spelling have developed an enthusiasm for the printed word that far exceeded the enthusiasm shown for reading, and they have taken an active part in their own learning, developing into enthusiastic writers. If writing is approached in an informal way requiring children to bring their own knowledge to the task, it can not only extend the knowledge each child has of the written language, but also can foster social interaction and cooperation within the classroom.

In responding to the question as to what she is now doing, Susan wrote, "I've taken an indefinite leave from teaching to be 'just a mother' to my son who was born last January. It's a whole new challenge and I feel fortunate to be able to devote nearly all my time to it."

This past summer, however, she took a class at the University of Wyoming and worked with Peggy Nardi on several early childhood projects.

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